

RECIPROCAL DEPENDENCE:

OPERATIONAL COMMANDERS AND THEIR STAFFS



by

Cynthia A. Covell

Lieutenant Commander, United States Navy

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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*Cynthia A. Covell*

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## Abstract

Operational commanders and their staffs have different roles and responsibilities at the operational level of war, but each is dependent on the other for mission accomplishment. They must work synergistically to meet the demands of modern warfare. Commanders must have a vision; staff officers support the vision and take care of the detailed work. Both Commanders and staff officers must be honest and competent. A review of the job requirements of operational commanders and their staffs reveals the importance of the commander-staff relationship in achieving the mission. Historical examples of commanders and their staffs are cited as examples of the commander-staff dynamic. Today's operational commanders must prepare staff officers to be the operational leaders of tomorrow.

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Reciprocal Dependence:  
Operational Commanders and Their Staffs

**I. Introduction**

Operational commanders and their staffs have different roles and responsibilities at the operational level of war but each is dependent on the other for mission accomplishment. Commanders rely on their staffs for advice and support while staffs depend on their commanders for decision making and vision. The skills required of operational commanders differ from those required of their staff officers. Leaders and followers. Commanders inspire and enable; staff officers do the detailed work necessary to supplement the commander. Both commanders and staffs are vital to success, however the relationship is based on the leader alone having responsibility for operational success.

The commander-staff relationship works best when both commanders and their staffs demonstrate two key attributes that cut across service lines: honesty and competence. As warfare becomes increasingly joint and the battlespace more complex, commanders and their staffs must have a healthy, complementary relationship where "all labor as one."<sup>1</sup> This essay examines job requirements of operational commanders and their staffs in an attempt to display how the dynamics of the commander-staff relationship contribute to operational success.

**II. Operational Commander: Roles and Responsibilities**

**Operational Leadership**

Operational leadership is senior-level leadership. The United States Army Field Manual (FM) 22-103 defines senior-level

leadership as "the art of direct and indirect influence and the skill of creating the conditions for sustained organizational success to achieve the desired result."<sup>2</sup> An instructor at the Naval War College compared operational commanders to play directors: the script is written at the strategic level; the operational commander directs the play at the operational level; and the play is carried out at the tactical level of war.

As leaders progress from the tactical to the operational level of war, the leadership skills required become increasingly more sophisticated. Tactical leaders, such as company commanders, use mostly direct influence on their troops to attain the military objective. Operational leaders, such as Joint Force Commanders, use direct and indirect influence on superiors, peers, subordinates, allies, coalition members, and sometimes a myriad of other government agencies to shape and control activities in their theater or area of operations.

Perhaps there is no better place for an operational commander to demonstrate senior leadership than at the operational level of warfare. Planning, conducting, and sustaining campaigns and major operations requires experienced leaders.

For the operational commander, success will depend on weighing, judging, and balancing ends, ways and means. He [or she] must be willing to run risks, because limited resources will most likely be the rule rather than the exception on the modern battlefield. Basically he [or she] must find the answer to such questions as what needs to be done, what resources are available with which to do it, and how it can best be accomplished. This is the very essence of leadership at the senior level.<sup>3</sup>

As officers increase in seniority, critical thinking skills become increasingly necessary for job success.<sup>4</sup> The Industrial College of the Armed Forces uses a leadership assessment tool called the Strategic Leader Development Inventory (SLDI) to measure 15 factors which impact on the effectiveness of senior leaders. The table below shows these factors:<sup>5</sup>

### Strategic Leader Development Inventory Factors

<u>FACTOR</u>	<u>DEFINITION</u>
<b>Conceptual Skills and Attributes</b>	
1. Conceptual Flexibility	- rapid grasp of complex data
2. Political Sensibility	- sensitive to political issues
3. Long-term Perspective	- critical thinking skills
4. Quick Study/Perceptive	- able to separate out trivia
5. Complex understanding	- competence
<b>Positive Attributes</b>	
6. Empowering Subordinates	- inspire subordinates
7. Strong Work Ethic	- self-motivated
8. Personal Objectivity	- composure under pressure
9. Professional Maturity	- moral courage
10. Team Performance Facilitation	- assertive
<b>Negative Attributes</b>	
11. Technical Incompetence	- do not know job
12. Explosive/Abusive	- lack of self-control
13. Arrogant/Self-serving/Unethical	- immature
14. Rigid/Micromanages	- kill motivation
15. Inaccessible	- out of touch

While developing the SLDI, researchers also found three recurring performance requirements for senior officers: Long-term vision; consensus building; and team building are considered essential for successful command.<sup>6</sup> Let us consider how each of these attributes contribute to a positive commander-staff relationship.

### III. Operational Commanders Must Have A Vision

"No wind is a fair wind if you don't know the port for which you are headed."<sup>7</sup>

Contemporary business and military leadership experts continue to write about the importance of leaders having a vision. Perhaps vision is the single most important factor which distinguishes leaders from followers. Vision points the way: it is the compass by which staff officers and subordinate commanders know if they are staying on course. Through vision, operational commanders convey their intent thereby contributing to mission accomplishment even if communication between commanders and their subordinates becomes interrupted.

Joint operations and campaign plans are based on the commander's vision, more formally known as the commander's concept. The commander's concept is "the intellectual core of the campaign plan, which presents a broad vision of the required aim or 'end state,' (the commander's intent) and how operations will be sequenced or synchronized to achieve conflict termination objectives (including required post conflict measures)."<sup>8</sup> The commander's vision provides the guidance necessary to allow staff members and subordinate commanders to accomplish the mission.

Janice Lindsay, director of internal communications and editorial services for the Norton Company, defines her ideal leader as "somebody who sets and defines the vision and encourages you to follow that vision, and then is there when you need them."<sup>9</sup> Ms. Lindsay would have been impressed with Field Marshall Slim's visionary leadership.

Field Marshall Slim, frequently referred to as a "man of the people", successfully directed the 14th Army in the defeat of Japan on land in the Burma Campaign. "In 1942, the British army had been pushed out of Burma and was demoralized, ill-equipped, understrength, disease-ridden and defeated. By 1945, it had retaken all of Burma, defeated the Japanese army and was one of the best fighting forces in the world."<sup>10</sup> How did this transition occur?

It was through Slim's vision and ability to inspire a calm confidence in his staff and his subordinate commanders. His vision was based on his belief that military members would give their all regardless of the circumstances if they were confident: confident in the cause for which they were fighting; confident in their leaders; confident in themselves; confident in each other; and confident in their training and weapons.<sup>11</sup> Slim's vision to beat the Japanese through building up the morale and spirit of his staff, subordinate commanders and his soldiers, worked. Despite having to solve problems induced by terrain, weather, logistics and the lack of adequate troops, Slim achieved remarkable success.

#### **IV. Operational Commanders Must Build Consensus**

Operational commanders require consensus building skills for a number of reasons. At the operational level, there is usually a need for commanders to obtain resources and accurate information from superiors, peers and other government agencies. The ability of commanders to gain commitment from those outside



his or her chain of command is equally as important as gaining commitment from subordinates within the chain of command.

Admiral Nimitz is known for his ability to build consensus and successfully interface with his peers and superiors. He gracefully entertained the myriad of official visitors who arrived in the Pacific during the war, and also rallied necessary support from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and promoted interservice coordination and cooperation among local senior officers. "Nimitz sought to head off explosive reactions and encourage teamwork among local officers....He hoped to promote cooperation by helping each to know the others and to understand the others' problems."<sup>12</sup> He successfully unified the joint "Central Pacific Force, comprising navy surface, submarines, and air, marines, and army ground and air forces, had effaced the threat to U.S.-Australian communications, charged across the Pacific taking bases, isolated Japan, and, at last, blockaded and bombed the Japanese into submission."<sup>13</sup>

#### V. Operational Leaders Must Build Teams

Operational commanders must ensure unity of effort. A staff can become genuinely effective only insofar as commanders acquire confidence in the staff's capacity to meet their needs.<sup>14</sup> Commanders must know their own strengths and weaknesses as well as those of their staffs so that personnel can be assigned properly and constructive relationships developed. Commanders need to know "for example, who are the dominant personalities? Who is normally conservative? Who will probably push for

adoption of the high risk; high gain course, regardless of the situation? Who may tend to compromise when he ought not to do so? How much control does the Executive Officer of Chief of Staff exert over them? In short, how can he get the best out of his team? He is responsible, but he needs to utilize fully the talent available to assist him in fulfilling his many responsibilities.<sup>15</sup>

Generals Eisenhower, MacArthur and Marshall knew the effective art of delegation and insisted their staffs take care of the detailed work without supervision. Eisenhower said of Marshall, "His ability to delegate authority not only expedited work but impelled every subordinate to perform beyond his suspected capacity."<sup>16</sup> MacArthur was described as a brilliant delegator: "It is by avoiding doing too much that General MacArthur gets so much done. He left his mind free of battle planning so he could concentrate on long-range aspects of the war. Thus he could exploit each opportunity as it occurred."<sup>17</sup>

Commanders must rise above the detailed staff work to keep their minds on the big picture. Ghandi's weekly day of silence for thought and prayer helped keep him from "losing mental freshness and spiritual power" and from becoming "formal, mechanical, and devitalized."<sup>18</sup>

Olmstead's study of battle staff effectiveness reveals nine organizational conditions which must be met for optimum staff performance:<sup>19</sup>

1. Clarified role expectations.
2. Stated command objectives.

3. Atmosphere of cooperation.
4. Free and Open communications.
5. Common understanding of performance standards.
6. Appropriate control. Avoidance of overcontrol.
7. Rewards distributed fairly.
8. Stable relationships. Low personnel turnover rate.
9. Efficient organizational systems.

Joint warfare is team warfare and "trust - defined as total confidence in the integrity, ability, and good character of another - is one of the most important ingredients in building strong teams."<sup>20</sup> Schwarzkopf said of his subordinate commanders: "I was absolutely dependent on the individual skills, temperaments, and judgments of my generals. But I could establish a clear framework and convey my intentions and the spirit in which I want the campaign carried out."<sup>21</sup>

#### VI. The Value of Staff Officers

In his book, Generalship: Its diseases and their cure, British Army Major General Fuller compares the general, the staff and the army to the brain, the nervous system and the muscles of any military organization.<sup>22</sup> The tasks of operational commanders are so numerous and complex that they must have staffs to assist them. "Without a good staff, a force, even of the best troops is a very helpless body, not capable of mobility. It is not too much to say that in war, the efficiency, health, comfort and safety of every individual, and thus the success of the whole force, depend on the way in which the staff do their work."<sup>23</sup>

As far back as 1500 B.C., military commanders understood that not even a "God-descended Pharaoh could successfully command an army without some help in executing the responsibilities of

command."<sup>24</sup> Around 1600 B.C. Thothmes I lead the Egyptian conquest of Palestine and Syria. Descriptions of Thothmes' command relationships during these campaigns reveal frequent discussions between Thothmes and members of his staff.<sup>25</sup> Even Alexander the Great had a staff and used subordinate commanders to control his detached armies. John Keegan discovered that Alexander the Great did not "find his way through the dark alone" but instead used the minds of others to guide him to the right course of action by using a "...consultative format of staff conferences."<sup>26</sup> Keegan describes Alexander the Great's relationship with his staff as "...peremptory and headstrong but usually with good reason, and [Alexander was] rarely deaf to counsels of caution well argued."<sup>27</sup>

In his classic study of the history and evolution of military staffs, United States Marine Corps Brigadier General J. D. Hittle describes the value of staff officers:

Great individual commanders attained great victories but their success was largely dependent upon the thinking done for them before the battle - staff planning - which made it possible to achieve victory on the field....Even if the mental powers of a commander were so extensive that he could direct every army detail, he was still only one man, and physically incapable of being everywhere to supervise the execution of his orders.<sup>28</sup>

## **VII. Staff Officer: Roles and Responsibilities**

"Joint Force Commanders are provided staffs to assist them in the decision making and execution process. The staff is an extension of the commander; its sole function is command support, and its authority is that which is delegated to it by the commander."<sup>29</sup> Good staff officers know and understand their role

as assistants to the operational commander. General Patton stated the staff officers role quite clearly:

The qualities essential in a commander and those in a good staff officer are as poles apart. It is the duty of the latter to take all detail and as much other work as possible off the shoulders of his commander so as to leave him time to think and plan ahead. He is expected to be tactful, patient, reticent and diplomatic. He is industrious, unselfish, and above all, happy to subordinate himself to another man.<sup>30</sup>

Naval Warfare Publication (NWP) 11 describes five key functions of staff officers:<sup>31</sup>

- \* furnish information and advice
- \* help prepare estimates and develop plans
- \* write and transmit directives and instructions
- \* supervise and evaluate the execution of planned actions
- \* relieve the commander of many administrative details

The skills for being a good staff officer are similar to those skills which today's employers are seeking in new employees. "The abilities to conceptualize, organize, verbalize thoughts, resolve conflicts and work in teams are increasingly cited as critical."<sup>32</sup> Successful staff officers must be energetic, detail-oriented and committed to the task.

In a speech entitled "Higher Command in War," given to the students of the United States Army Command and General Staff College, Field Marshall Slim espoused his philosophy of the role of his staff officers. He demanded two things from his staff officers: information and suggestions. In turn, Slim, as the operational commander, formed his own judgement based on the alternative courses of action suggested to him by his staff. Sometimes he rejected his staffs suggested courses of action and thought of one himself.<sup>33</sup>

Slim was also insistent that his staff regard itself as the servant of the fighting troops. "In the Burma Campaign, very often owing to shortage of air transport, a lot of my troops, my forward formations, had to be on half rations. Whenever they went on half rations, I used to put my headquarters on half rations; it was theatrical I admit, but it did remind the young staff officers with healthy appetites what is like to be hungry, and it perhaps put a little more ginger in getting the supplies forward."<sup>34</sup>

#### **VIII. Operational Commanders and Staff Officers Must Be Ethical**

"Honesty is better than all policy."<sup>35</sup>

This is not motherhood and apple pie; honesty plays a critical role at the operational level of war. "Every social activity, every human enterprise requiring people to act in concert, is impeded when people aren't honest with each other."<sup>36</sup> Operational commanders, frequently faced with moral dilemmas and decisions affecting the lives of their troops, must not only be honest themselves, but must seize every opportunity to shape the values of their staffs and subordinate commanders through their actions, policies and practices. "The established policies and practices in turn will largely determine the command climate; and the command climate of an organization will directly affect how well it functions."<sup>37</sup>

Both Generals Omar N. Bradley and George C. Marshall stressed to their subordinates the criticality of truth telling. Bradley stated "A leader should encourage members of his staff to

speaking up if they think the commander is wrong. He should invite constructive criticism. It is a grave error for the leader to surround himself with 'Yes' men."<sup>38</sup> General Marshall wanted to hear pro and con arguments before making decisions to help him see all sides of an issue. On one occasion General Wedemeyer (a member of General Marshall's staff) made a presentation to General Marshall which was critical of General Marshall's position on the issue. After the presentation, Wedemeyer told Marshall that he hoped he had not been disrespectful. Marshall replied, "Wedemeyer, don't ever fail to give me your unequivocal expression of your views. You would do me a disservice if you did otherwise."<sup>39</sup>

If operational commanders are to make sound decisions, the advice from staff officers must be sound. Colonel Gary Payton (USAF) makes the distinction between honesty and accuracy. He writes, "Accuracy is the absence of factual mistakes or errors. Honesty, however, is the adherence to facts and truthfulness with which those facts are interpreted and presented."<sup>40</sup> It is similar to going by "the spirit of the law" as well as the "letter of the law." Reaching conclusions that are not supported by facts may lead to flawed decisions. Staff officers must make it clear to their commanders those conclusions which are backed up by hard facts and those that are inferred, extrapolated, exaggerated or assumed.

You may recall the misinformation that General Schwarzkopf received regarding the Safwan airfield in Iraq. Safwan was the

Iraqi military landing strip just north of Kuwaiti border and General Schwarzkopf had decided to hold cease-fire talks there. The situation map Schwarzkopf was using showed the entire sector around the Safwan airfield being held by the 1st Infantry Division. But when Schwarzkopf indicated to General Yeosock, the Third Army Commander, that he wanted to hold the cease-fire talks at Safwan, General Yeosock relayed to General Schwarzkopf that there were no forces at or near Safwan even though just one day earlier General Schwarzkopf had ordered VII Corps to take the road junction two miles away from Safwan. VII Corps had flown combat patrols along the highway near Safwan and had reported no enemy forces, but its troops were never in the sector.

Schwarzkopf says that when he heard this he felt like he had been punched in the gut. "Why did they [VII Corps] send in reports that they'd occupied it?" Schwarzkopf asked.<sup>41</sup> Later Schwarzkopf found out that not only had erroneous "mission accomplished" reports been submitted but that an Iraqi unit occupied the airfield and that fifteen Republican Guard tanks and a brigade commander were spotted at the road junction. Schwarzkopf ordered Yeosock to take the road junction in spite of the cease-fire.<sup>42</sup>

Finding all of this out barely twenty-four hours before the cease-fire talks were to begin had to be a shock to General Schwarzkopf. General Schwarzkopf quickly relayed the Safwan dilemma to General Powell (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) and kept Powell informed as the situation unfolded. After dispatching overwhelming force, the 1st Infantry Division



successfully drove the Iraqi commander and his tanks off the Safwan air strip and the site was prepared for the cease-fire meeting. This situation could have had a decidedly negative effect if the Iraqis had called our bluff. This example demonstrates the significant problems operational commanders face when given erroneous information.

#### **IX. Staff Officers versus Operational Commanders**

Both staff officers and operational commanders must be honest and competent. But by the nature of their roles, staff officers use mostly managerial skills while commander's use their leadership expertise. Does this mean a good staff officer cannot make a good commander and vice versa? Not necessarily. Although Patton, one of our best combat leaders, was a horrible staff officer. His 1928 efficiency report as a staff officer in Hawaii read "This officer would be invaluable in time of war but is a disturbing element in time of peace."<sup>43</sup>

Consider the advice given to the German General Staff concerning the selection and assignment of officers illustrates this idea:

Observe first that sort of officer, the brilliant and the lazy. There is command material there that must not be overlooked. Next, consider the brilliant and energetic. These combined qualities make for an excellent chief of staff, chief of the operations section or intelligence section. Thirdly, one may encounter the stupid and the lazy. This sort may be retained as line officers, for they will not rise to positions of great responsibility, and they can perform all kinds of dull duties. Finally, one may discover the combination of the stupid and the energetic. When this kind is discovered, get rid of him immediately. There can be no greater danger to the armies of our Fatherland!<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps retired Army Lieutenant General John Forrest, a

seasoned staff officer and combat leader, states it best. "You manage bullets, and you lead people. Both skills are required of an officer, and the very best officers know when to use each skill."<sup>45</sup>

## **X. Conclusion**

Operational commanders and staff officers are vital links in the warfighting chain. Each has their own roles and responsibilities but it is the operational commander who must provide the vision, build consensus with seniors and peers, and mold his staff and subordinate commanders into a winning team. Competent staff officers who are honest, hard working and in support of the vision are invaluable to their commanders.

The commander-staff relationship is based on reciprocal dependence: leaders provide the vision; staff officers make it happen. Leaders focus on the top line; staff officers focus on the bottom line.<sup>46</sup> Senior leaders must pay attention to their relationships with their staff members. Modern warfare demands peak performance from operational commanders and their staffs. Not only do commanders need to develop their staff officers for duty today, but today's staff officers will be tomorrow's operational commanders!

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